

Excerpt from *WordSmith: A Memoir* by A. C. H. Smith

As soon as I had delivered *Treatment* to Weidenfeld, my agent at that time, Jackie Baldick, told me that they were looking for someone to write a biography of Dickens, to accompany a new tv series, *Dickens of London*. The series was scripted by Wolf Mankowitz, and he had said he would write the accompanying book too, but now had run out of time. I knew little about Dickens's life, and told Jackie I did not fancy the job. Not my kind of thing. "They're offering a thousand pounds," she said in her engaging Baltimore voice.

"That's not much, for a biography."

"It is for five weeks' work."

"They want it *in five weeks*?"

"Ant'ny, you're always telling me you're broke. How often can you make a thousand pounds in five weeks?" She had a way with her, Jackie. "Oh, and when it comes out it will be by Wolf Mankowitz. Okay? You don't tell anyone that you wrote it."

I did it. Dr Johnson wrote *Rasselas* in a week, to pay for his mother's funeral. I could not allocate a lot of the five weeks to original research. I depended on Edgar Johnson's superb twovolume biography. I did not plagiarise his words at all, but accepted his chronology without question. My spare time from writing 2,000 words every day I spent dipping around in other books about Dickens, and consulting one or two Dickensian friends. The result was better than it might have been, and was sumptuously illustrated. On p.82 of the UK edition is a sentence that starts: *Bentley yielded again, controlling his sullen mood in the hope (not one that was obviously ludicrous for... which, read acronymically, reveals: By A C H Smith not Wolf. Mankowitz was beyond acronymising.*

On the day the book was published I was rung, in Bristol, by someone in Weidenfeld's publicity department. "Just want to check one or two details with you, before the launch this evening."

"There's a launch?"

"Yes. Oh, haven't you been invited?"

"No." I'd only written the book. In five weeks.

"Sorry about that. You know how things are. Do come, if you'd like to. It's at George's place, in Cheyne Walk."

When I had answered her questions I put the telephone down in a seethe. But it was a party at George's place, one of George Weidenfeld's legendary parties, it would probably be my only chance to see one of them for myself. I went to Temple Meads.

In Cheyne Walk, the first three people I saw were Harold Wilson, just retired from Downing Street, Peter Sellers, and David Frost. It was legendary all right. I stayed clear of the celebrity end of the salon, so cannot report what any of them were talking about, but Sellers kept them all laughing. The whole evening Mankowitz, seated next to a woman with orange hair, accepted a parade of congratulations. I kept clear of him too. In his position I would have been acutely embarrassed to be confronted by the real author. But I underestimated him. When it was time for me to leave, it occurred to me that if, the next day, he happened to be told that the chap who had written his book had been at the party but I hadn't even said hello to him, it would strike him that I had been uncomradely, disrespectful. I hedged my bets. I went over, didn't identify myself, shook his hand, wished him luck with the book and the series, and said I had to be going now, to catch the last train back to Bristol. My final word had given the game away. "Bristol?" he asked. Someone must have mentioned that his jobbing hack lived in Bristol.

"Yes."

"What's your name?"

"Anthony Smith."

“Excuse me,” he growled to the woman with orange hair, and rose, for the first time in an hour. He was a few inches taller than my six feet. He put his arm around my shoulders, and quietly assured me that I had written “a wonderful book”.

“Thank you.”

His arm squeezed me. “This series is going to be a very big hit, Anthony. They will want more from me. I’m going to write them and you, you are going to write the books. We are going to make a great deal of money, Anthony. I’m going to give them Robert Louis Stevenson, Paul Gauguin, and - You got any ideas for a third?”

From nowhere, I suggested, “Victor Hugo?”

Hole in one with my eyes shut. “Victor Hugo! Perfect.” An extra big squeeze. He told me we had to stay in touch. “We are going to make a great deal of money, Anthony.”

“Good. Good. I’ll tell my agent about it.”

His manner altered. “Your agent? We’re writers, Anthony. We understand each other. We don’t need any fucking agents getting between us. It’s you and me.”

Nevertheless, the next day I rang Jackie, and told her. She said she would get hold of Mankowitz and firm things up. She rang back later the same day. “OK, Ant’ny, I’ve spoken to Mankowitz, and here’s the deal. You do all the research. You write the books, then give him the manuscripts, and he uses them to write the scripts. He gets half the book income, and all the tv money.”

“That’s a terrible deal, Jackie.”

“Damn right it’s terrible. That man would charge his grandmother half-a-crown for a rotten grapefruit.”

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For more information about the author and his work, please visit www.achsmith.co.uk